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## FREE VERSE AND ITS PROPAGANDA

Poetry is written by ear and is recognized by the ear, and only when it obeys the laws of rhythm do we recognize it as poetry. But just as a knowledge of law is indispensable to any man who contemplates either breaking it or "sailing close to the wind" and of very little use to the man who is naturally decent and owns his own home, so knowledge of the principles of metrics is indispensable to the metrical innovator and not of much use to the poet who sings out of a full inspiration as well as out of a traditional background.

Whether one likes free verse or not is largely a matter of taste. The real question is whether one likes what has been done in free verse. To say that the medium itself is good or bad is rather silly, for, after all, free verse is simply language written in cadence—or as Dr. Patterson, of Columbia University, has more or less proved—it is prose with the rhythm emphasized by the line structure; and nobody likes or dislikes prose as such. Our like or dislike is for Conrad, or Meredith, or W. H. Hudson, or Dr. Frank Crane.

Perhaps the salient thing about the free verse movement, however, is not its actual achievement (for what free verse writer of our time is either more realistic than Wilfrid Wilson Gibson or, in certain moods, Mr. Hardy or Mr. Lawrence, all on the one hand, or more mystical and suggestive than Walter de la Mare, on the other hand? Or more psycho-analytical than Mr. Lawrence or Mr. T. S. Eliot—who generally use metre and rhyme?), but it is the intense propaganda promoted by the free verse writers for their particular methods. There are even examples of free verse writers and imagists reviewing their own work under aliases or anonymously, but we do not mean that. We mean the more dignified propaganda of the essay on the technique of poetry. Practically all of these essays seek to give metreless verse prestige by the utterly false statement that metred verse is an artificial thing whose possible combinations and permutations have already been exhausted. Young poets who have not studied metrics may read these articles, take their assertions for truth, and turn

away from what are really their best possibilities. The writer knows of one particular case, that of a young free verse writer who is very well known among his 'schoolfellows', whose work has appeared in more than one magazine and who has won a considerable prize for his poetry. He happens to have had little formal education in English, and to have read radical verse and criticism almost exclusively. In one of his poems occur these lines:—

"Let no blasphemer till the sacred earth  
Or scatter seed upon it. . . ."

The writer remarked to him that he had achieved a rather good line and a half of iambic pentameter.

"What's that?" asked the puzzled poet, who had been led to believe by sundry articles in *Poetry* that iambic pentameter was a "strait-waistcoat", but had come no nearer than that to finding out what it really was.

Obviously these propagandist-metricians may do damage, so that it seems worth while to examine one of their pronouncements. In *The Musical Quarterly* for January of the current year Miss Amy Lowell has a very interesting article on "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry". Her main theme is the likenesses she hears between the free rhythms of what she calls modern verse—that is to say, free verse (from a more traditional point of view blank verse has "free" rhythms) and the music of such men as Debussy, Scriabine, and their *confrères*. The analogies she points out are doubtless valid, and her paper is very suggestive. But the ignorance of the basis of English verse which it displays is so astounding that one can only imagine that a prejudice against that form of writing has in some way clouded Miss Lowell's vision and memory. Were ordinary English verse what she says it is, it were well indeed to abandon it.

And the curious thing is that Miss Monroe, writing in *Poetry*, says very nearly the same thing, although she hides her quite unmodern conception of verse rhythm under the mantle of Sidney Lanier's theories, while from internal evidence we should judge that Miss Lowell has read no metrician later than Poe, whose *Rationale of English Verse* left much to be desired as a systematic treatise.

The first of Miss Lowell's strictures on our regular verse concerns the monotony of Alexander Pope—a charge that may well be granted, except that she remarks that the verse of his period was even more monotonous than the music of the time, because “the system of rests employed in music gave some variation of effect within the pattern, whereas the verses sounded monotonously on every beat with never an omission. . . .”

Now that is not accurate, as there were phrase-pauses in Pope, and even in the most orthodox blank verse there is a delicate syncopation due to the pauses between words, pauses which are often not recognized—so that metricians have said that our iambic verse is in three-eight time because the syllables of each foot are equivalent to three shorts, whereas more careful metricians, notably Mr. Omond, declare that the paues between words, if taken as metrical rests, make our blank verse duple, a very different thing from triple time.

But worse follows. Miss Lowell, who begins her article with a fling at the “smart ignorance” of those who venture to criticize her, has apparently neither heard of Lanier nor read Saintsbury. She does quote Poe in this essay, and from her total ignorance of the fact that there is a recognized metrical pause in verse structure, something which Poe also conspicuously overlooked, one is led to believe that he is her main authority in these matters. But here is Miss Lowell's own statement of the metrical foundation of our regular verse:—

“We speak of metrical verse because it is a verse based on metre. The unit of metre is the foot, and a metrical line contains a given number of such feet, what number being determined beforehand by the pattern chosen for the whole poem. There are only five feet proper to English metre: the iambus, the trochee, the anapæst, the dactyl, and the spondee. Some metrists even deny the existence of the latter [*sic*]. Any attempt to foist the use of other feet into the analysis defeats itself, since all longer feet are capable of being split up into one or other of the main four I have given, and of course a unit must be the lowest possible element into which anything can be divided. It is surprising what a number of changes the poets have been able to ring out of this seemingly inflexible medium. But, even so, there are many rhythms that they simply could not render. The terrible defect of no rests was an insurmountable handicap. . . .”

Taking the last point first, we may imagine with what trouble Mother Goose managed to overcome that handicap of no rests. But she did it, as this quotation testifies:—

“Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,  
Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old.”

Any child who recites that instinctively catches the good Mother’s intention, and children have never had any difficulty in unconsciously ‘scanning’ the lines—their reading was their scansion.

Mother Goose having showed him how to do it, Browning was also able to overcome this terrible handicap:—

“Kentish Sir Byng stood for his king,  
Bidding the crop-headed parliament swing.”

The rest after “Byng” is very obviously of the same time-value as the syllables ‘headed’, and it is a truly metrical rest; that is to say, it is not a mere grammatical pause, but has its exact musical or mathematical relation to the time-structure of the line.

Even so orthodox a metrician as Saintsbury allows for the rest in the scansion of regular verse, and Lanier has gone into the matter in great detail. But Miss Lowell has apparently never heard that a whole system of scansion for verse on musical analogies has been worked out, and that her iambics and dactyls and doubtful spondees wear a rather faded look to-day. Certainly, they are used only analogically, for an English “accentual iambic” may be in quantity-arrangement a classical trochee, a spondee, or almost what you will,—very often a pyrrhic. Certainly, if English verse has iambics in the accentual sense it also has spondees. Poe, we believe, ruled them out (another straw pointing to the source of Miss Lowell’s metrics), but as long as we write verse with two level stresses or with two long syllables coming together we have spondees. For instance, consider passages from more than one of Shakespeare’s sonnets:—

“Sap checkt with frost and lustie leaves quite gone.”

or—

“Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new.”

But Miss Lowell’s treatment of the pentameter line is based purely on the foregoing artificial considerations. She does not

criticise the actual work of the poets—even when she compliments them on what they have been able to ‘wring out’ of this inflexible medium. Had Miss Lowell gone to the original poems, instead of to a very doubtful theory of their structure, she would have known that the real poets did not wring out changes on a fixed framework at all. They wrote by ear, being guided by a very loose convention, and their scansion was either an afterthought or else they never scanned at all. Miss Lowell says that a line of Keats has “an even more daring innovation” than the displacing of an accent, for in—

“Meantime on shady levels, mossy fine,”

“one accent is deliberately suppressed and the next boldly displaced, to be followed by only one true accent, and to end on another displacement.” I do not quite understand that sentence, although I think that she means it to apply to another line in the passage she quotes,—

“Young companies nimbly began dancing”—

to which the description would more or less apply. But the point is that Miss Lowell is greatly surprised at what she calls the suppression and displacement of accents, whereas it is quite a matter of course in nearly all blank verse. And again she tells us that a line of Robert Frost’s has three accents, “where a blank verse line should have five.”

As a matter of fact, however, a blank verse line should not have five “undisplaced” accents, and it need not have five at all. Shakespeare, for instance, writes:—

“I do remember an apothecary.”

The most that we can really say of a blank verse line is that it shall have ten syllables, with a tendency to alternate stress; or that duple rising metre is its norm. But we must always remember that if blank verse keeps to its norm it is, as Robert Bridges says, “more likely to madden than to lull.” How “bold” Keats is in suppressing an accent we may imagine when we remember that Milton’s *Paradise Lost* begins with a very irregular line and moves through twenty-six lines before reaching one regular blank verse line:—

“And justify the ways of God to men.”

When we remember that as many as three of the five feet of a blank verse line may be trisyllabic, we see how essentially different blank verse is from the strait and narrow thing that Miss Lowell holds up to terrify young poets.

In fact, blank verse is even a freer medium than is sometimes implied when we say that the syllables may be increased in any line to thirteen or so by the use of trisyllabic feet, and that its accents may be displaced or occluded. It is so free that often the problem is to avoid writing it when one wishes to write prose. It is so free, indeed, that it really evades scansion altogether. Recent discussion amply attests this. If blank verse were actually in three-eighth time—as Lanier asserts—*Paradise Lost* would be slightly more suggestive of a waltz than it is. But while our lyric measures have their rhythm set for them by beats occurring at isochronous intervals, the “feet” of blank verse do not do this at all. From one to three of the beats may be quite theoretical. The line may begin with a trochee instead of an iambic foot. The isochronous intervals which some prosodists have asserted to be there are unheard by others. In a recent discussion in the London *Times*, T. Sturge Moore, a poet of achievement and a scholar, took issue with Dr. D. S. MacColl on this very matter, and the resulting correspondence showed an utter lack of agreement on the subject. T. B. Rudmose-Brown, the late Thomas MacDonough, and Robert Bridges, though not agreeing in anything else, all agree in making syllabic verse of this variety a *genre* in itself. In this type of verse, says MacDonough, in the little book, *Thomas Campion and the Art of English Poetry*, the only isochronous interval is the line. The line is “weighted” by long syllables following short, by accented syllables following unaccented—which is not of course the same thing—and by syllables of differing pitch. The throwing of the phrase across from one line to the next gives a further variation. Obviously, any attempt to scan mechanically such a line is hopeless.

On the other hand, what MacDonough calls “song verse”, including lyric measures and the measures which Bridges would call “stress verse”, is determined by beats occurring at equal time-intervals. We have usually called such verse by classical

names, but the names are really meaningless. Miss Lowell gives us a beautiful example of how meaningless they are. She tells us that in a poem, *After Hearing a Waltz by Bartok*,—

“I attempted to reproduce waltz rhythm, a perfectly regular thing and one which it might be supposed quite possible to render in strict metre. Horror of horrors! it was not. The dactylic metre I had proposed to myself gave no swing in words, and I was obliged to fall back upon the bastard waltz accent of the anapæstic.”

Fortunately, Miss Lowell was not obliged to fall far, because in any sequence of more than one or two feet the two measures are the same. If the reader doubt it let him look up Charles Kingsley's *Andromeda*. Kingsley meant to write it in accentual hexameters, a dactylic metre. But it reads in anapæsts, and as anapæstic Saintsbury scans it. It is simply a matter of the convenience of beginning the foot with the accented or with the unaccented syllable. In fact, some metricians scan all English verse dactylically or trochaically, always beginning the foot with the accented syllable, and if a line begins with an unaccented syllable—as any typically iambic or anapæstic line would—they simply mark off the initial unaccented syllable or syllables and call it an anacrusis, or, if they are very consistent musical scansionists, they call it the remainder of the bar begun by the last accented syllable in the line above. For instance, one of the lines in Miss Lowell's poem reads:—

“I was drunk with the lust of his life.”

This may be divided anapæstically:—

“I was drunk | with the lust | of his life,”

or, dactylically with anacrusis:—

“I was | drunk with the | lust of his | life,”

in which latter case “life” is an incomplete foot to be completed by the anacrusis of the next line.

Most of us, however, will not care for this way of dividing verse, since it breaks up the metric unity of the line, but it is theoretically sound. And, incidentally, it may be said that if we desire to speak of feet in English verse as Miss Lowell does, we



should be more systematic in our use of foot terms. Many an anapæst in English does not consist of two short syllables followed by a long; nor of two short syllables unaccented, followed by an accented syllable; but of a short and a long syllable, followed by another long with or without a slight accent on it. For instance, let the reader observe these lines from James Joyce:—

“The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing  
Where I go.”

Now, of all the feet that Miss Lowell gives us for English verse, the only one that will fit that first line is the anapæst, so that the line would scan thus:—

“The grey winds, | the cold winds | are blow | ing”—

—two anapæsts, an iambic, and a hypermetrical ending,—so-called. But really those two anapæsts are each what a Greek metrician would call a bacchius, and if we use the one term, why not the other? For they do not give the same rhythmic effect as ordinary anapæsts. But this quotation may illustrate another error in Miss Lowell's metrics. She informs us of a sample of free verse that she quotes, which changes its rhythm at the end, that “the change of movement at the end is something which the older poetry had no means of achieving except by an abrupt jump to another metre. Such a jump would have been far too violent. . . .”, etc.

Now that statement is quite out of accord with the facts. We have seen a line—that quoted above—which, if we keep to Miss Lowell's terminology, has to be called predominantly anapæstic. But some readers have already objected to that scan-sion of the line on the ground that in point of fact it is a purely amphibrachic line, the amphibrach being a foot of three syllables, of which the middle syllable is accented:—

“The grey winds, | the cold winds | are blowing”;

and that is the predominant movement of this lyric:—

“All day I hear the noise of waters  
Making moan  
Sad as the sea-bird is when going  
Forth alone,

He hears the winds cry to the waters'  
Monotone.

"The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing  
Where I go.  
I hear the noise of many waters  
Far below.  
All day, all night, I hear them flowing  
To and fro."

That poem alone refutes Miss Lowell's statement that one cannot change the rhythm of fixed verse except by abruptly jumping from one metre to another. The phrasing through that poem is amphibrachic, that is to say, the natural groups of words are likely to be amphibrachs ("of waters", "when going", "the waters") but all of the long lines do not scan as pure amphibrachs, while each short line is the opposite of an amphibrachic,—being a cretic, a foot consisting of a short between two longs.

English poetry as a whole refutes Miss Lowell's idea of the invariability of rhythm when we use a fixed metric scheme. Not only can we have lyrics like the above, which, if scanned in the ordinary way, *i.e.*,—

"All day | all night | I hear | them flow | ing to | and fro,"

give us straight iambic verse, yet are rhythmically quite different from it, but we can put trochaic phrasing on an iambic base. Indeed, one of the latest books on prosody, Andrews's *The Reading and Writing of Verse*, devotes a whole chapter to the more obvious variations of movement and phrasing within the metric schemes.

We have said that English lyrical verse is distinguished from syllabic verse and from prose by its regularly recurring accents. Briefly noting that Miss Lowell's list of feet does not at all allow for verse in quadruple time, where there are four syllables to each foot, let us see what she has to say on the matter of free verse. To our surprise she essays to bring free verse into the fold of what has been considered regular verse in English for a good many years. Here is Miss Lowell's apologia:—

"The French word *vers* does not mean 'verse' but line.  
[Of course, the word "verse" actually means line if we use

our terms accurately.] *Vers libre*, then, meant 'free line', or a line which was not obliged to contain a prescribed number of feet. Had we called the form, as the French do, 'free line' we should at least have had an accurate, if exceedingly clumsy, title for it. The proper English term is really 'cadenced verse'; that is, verse built upon cadence and not upon metre. By 'cadence' in poetry, we mean a rhythmic curve, containing one or more stressed accents, and corresponding roughly to the necessity of breathing. This must also correspond to a depression or slight dropping in the tension of the subject at that point. These curves are made up of a number of time-units, which, again, although they do not accord perfectly, still do so with extraordinary approximation. Cadenced verse is non-syllabic, and in that sense resembles music far more than the old metrical verse ever did. As music varies the numbers of notes in a bar by splitting them up into smaller time-valuations, so cadenced verse may vary the number of its syllables within the duration of its time-units to any extent desired. Much cadenced verse can be read to a metronome, although the inexorable tick is certainly as annoying to the reader as it is to the musical performer, be he singer or instrumentalist."

Miss Lowell follows this paragraph with the remarks about metrical verse which we have already quoted.

Readers of the ordinary specimens of free verse will be surprised to learn from the above that it is more like music than the regular verse that the late Dr. Campion—for instance—used to write. But their surprise will be at least mitigated if they recognize that what Miss Lowell has described above is not free verse at all, but stress verse. Although he does not analyze it in time-units, Dr. Bridges has already written an elaborate book largely devoted to the exposition of such verse,—his *Milton's Prosody*. But to expect Miss Lowell to concern herself with the work of so 'academic' a theorist and poet as Dr. Bridges would, perhaps, be too much. Her description applies to nearly all of Coleridge's *Christabel*, of course—that poem and its preface being classical in this connection. It describes the stress verse written by Robert Bridges, of which this may be taken as a rather well-known sample:—

LONDON SNOW<sup>1</sup>

"When | men were | all a | sleep the | snow came | flying,  
 In | large white | flakes | falling on the | city | brown,  
 | Stealthily and per | petually | settling and | loosely | lying  
 | Hushing the | latest | traffic of the | drowsy | town. . . ."

The reader will note that the number of beats in each line is constant, while the number of syllables is not. But this verse, though fulfilling the conditions laid down by Miss Lowell, is certainly not free verse. And it is not verse which she could consistently call metrical. What is it, then?

Apparently it is something which is not at all present to Miss Lowell's consciousness. But if her own free verse is not the same thing as the above—and one has only to read it to hear that it is not, what is it? Miss Lowell is very fond of quoting the remarks of Professor Patterson of Columbia, who studied rhythms with phonographic and time-recording apparatus, and of referring to "my experiments with Dr. Patterson". What we do not remember to have seen her quote is the result of Dr. Patterson's experiments with her, and so we shall quote those for her. They occur in the preface to the second edition of his book, *The Rhythms of Prose*:—

"What is achieved, as a rule, in Miss Lowell's case, is emotional prose, emphatically phrased, excellent and moving. 'Spaced prose' we may call it. With other writers the result is often merely unrhymed verse, with irregular length of line; or, as is frequently apparent in the writings of Edgar Lee Masters, a mosaic of bits of verse and bits of prose experience.

"Miss Lowell delivers her *vers libre* with much more swing and vim than one commonly hears in prose; but surely all particularly vigorous prose, if it is to be valued as a fit medium for vigorous thought and feeling, must also be thus delivered. Colonel Roosevelt, in fact, delivers his own prose with just as much 'stress' and with just as much 'curve'—to use Miss Lowell's defining terms in her account of *vers libre*—as Miss Lowell contributes to her 'free verse'. Where, then, is the preferential difference as to form? If there is any difference in *degree* of stress, the intensity is undoubtedly more pronounced in the delivery of Colonel Roosevelt. . . ."

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<sup>1</sup> The foot-mark is placed before each stressed syllable to show the variable number of syllables to the "foot", as we may call it for convenience.

That ought to settle the question, and we may 'sum up the result of the foregoing criticism as follows:—

The upholders of free verse, who are usually also the detractors of regular verse, seek to exalt their alleged form—which experiments show is not a separate form at all—by misrepresenting the constitution of ordinary verse.

They misrepresent it by confounding its metre and its rhythm, which latter is a free movement emphasized and made more measurable to the ear by being written against a metric scheme which is sometimes quite apparent or, as in the case of blank verse, is not always apparent but exists as a convention in the mind of the poet and of the auditor.

This confusion enables them to say, without any sense of unverity, that the poets have 'wrung out' of the fixed forms all that is possible, whereas the truth is that with our English accentuation, our English word-lengths, and the possibilities of 'time' in the musical sense, and of pauses in the musical and in the grammatical senses, our regular and stress verse is capable of endless variations.

They write—often—stress or regular verse without knowing it, and when they find that their real free verse is actually prose they hasten to cover it with the mantle (with the previous owner's name-tag removed) of stress-prosody, a form as old as the earliest modern English verse, but one which, under French syllabic-prosody influence, simply failed of recognition for a few generations.

The result of this metrical propaganda, in which others besides Miss Lowell have indulged, is that young poets who might otherwise be trying to carry on the 'free' tradition in English verse, who might be experimenting both along the lines laid down by Bridges for stress-verse and along those laid down by Stone for verse that is quantitative in the classical sense, are, instead, writing in a mixture which has no rhythmical foundation and which generally fails to be musical or pleasing, and sometimes even fails to be expressive at all. The remedy for this state of affairs is to decline to recognize the supposed authority of any writer on metrics who pretends to write *de novo*, yet fails to give due credit to his precursors.

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